

*Romantic Poets in Epic Form of Nordic Countries and Estonia's Classical Dialect Poetry*¹

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Abstract. The recently awakened academic interest in the multilingual character of the written culture of the Baltic region in more distant times calls for fresh attention to and reassessment of the poetry of the ethnic minorities that have inhabited the territory of Estonia. One such minority was the Estonian Swedes who dwelt in western Estonia up to 1944. This paper mainly focuses on the lifecourse, as reflected in his poems, of Estonian Swedish native skald Mats Ekman, who wrote in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Since his work and the whole topic of Estonian Swedish culture are largely unknown in Estonia and everywhere else, except for the direct descendants of that minority, the paper offers the necessary background information, while also applying the method of close reading to a few of the author's poems in the original Swedish dialect and in English. Parallels are drawn with the major classical authors of neighbouring Nordic countries, such as Esaias Tegnér of Sweden and Aleksis Kivi of Finland, authors who can be seen as models not only for Ekman, but also for a number of significant ethnic Estonian poets who wrote in Estonian, such as Juhan Liiv and Ernst Enno.

Keywords: ethnic minorities, romanticism, dialect poetry, ethical humour

The poetic heights of the literatures of Sweden and Finland of the age of Romanticism, now regrettably in oblivion, have seemed unattainable ideals to Estonian literati since the time of Juhan Liiv, who wrote admiringly about Esaias Tegnér, the Swedish national skald, in his poem "Björnsonile" (To Björnson, 1897). (Liiv 2013: 83) From Finland, the novel *Seitsemän veljestä* (Seven Brothers) by Aleksis Kivi, the founder of literature in Finnish, has inspired generations of Estonians, becoming part of their native culture since the publication of the first Estonian translation in 1924. Tegnér is primarily known for his long epic poem *Frithiofs saga*. But both these epic literary giants,

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Swedish and Finnish, were also talented lyric poets: the lyricism of their poetry writing is evident in the most sublime passages of their epic works.

“Let us make a clear difference that our *school* is beyond the gulf”, thus, Juhan Liiv is, in his poetic fragment “German literature”, referring to his conviction that Estonian writers should first and foremost look for their models in the literature of Finland. (Liiv 2013: 408) A translator of Aleksis Kivi’s poems into Estonian, the Estonian poet Debora Vaarandi, has said that for her, the most beautiful of Kivi’s poems is the one incorporated into his novel *Seitsemän veljestä*, found in the 14th chapter, describing Eero’s wife, Anna, the housewife of Seunala, chanting a Finnic lullaby to her infant. The passage includes short rhymed verses surrounded by lyrical prose of nature and gentle human feelings, worded with biblical beauty. There are two translated versions in Estonian, as of the whole novel: Friedebert Tuglas’s translation from 1924 and Aivo Lõhmus’s from 2005. The folksong-like power and flexibility of style and images which characterises Aleksis Kivi’s Finnish poems has been best rendered into Estonian by August Annist. A few of Annist’s translations from the Finnish verse collection *Kanteletar*, compiled by Elias Lönnrot, such as the heroic ballad “Laalmanti and Inkeri”, first published in 1930, could be called not just translated poetry but poetic *chef-d’oeuvres* in an archaic form of the Estonian language.

The romantic heights of the Swedish of Esaias Tegnér are the most powerful in the expression of human drama. As an author in Finnish Aleksis Kivi adds to that an esthetic autonomy of the representations of nature: nature which surrounds the village people becomes a soul.

The Estonian Wikipedia article about Esaias Tegnér erroneously states that the Estonian translation of *Frithiofs saga* was published in 1922. Actually, two books in Estonian based on Tegnér’s epic appeared in Tallinn that year. Both are prose descriptions of the work. Three songs of the epic, the First, the Third and the Seventh, were translated into Estonian verse in the first decade of the 21st century by the author of this paper. The first of those songs appeared in the journal *Akadeemia* in 2003, the other two in the electronic journal of poetry translations *Ninniku* in 2012. In the egoistic and fragmented digital age, their publication has gone unnoticed.

The processes of ignoring and forgetting, and especially of marginalising less aggressively presented authors, have always been at work. The Estonian romantic poet Ernst Enno (1875–1934) was an introvert in his life and writings. He nearly always stood apart from the mainstream culture of Estonians during his lifetime and has remained a hermit-like figure for following generations. In 1973, the Estonian writer Paul Rummo edited and wrote an afterword to the second edition of Ernst Enno’s 1910 collection of short stories titled

Minu sõbrad (My Friends). Enno came from Tartu County, but settled later in Haapsalu where he worked as a school counsellor. He visited the schools of the Estonian Swedes, for which purpose he mastered some Swedish. Although most of Enno's writings are in the common written Estonian of his time, a language that appears nearly dialectal to present-day readers. In his afterword, Paul Rummo writes:

Minu sõbrad is a by-product of Enno's scarce and uneven poetry. Despite August Kitzberg's favourable initial greeting, it has so far been left out and almost forgotten. Vana Tuuletallaja's [August Kitzberg] prophecy "let the younger ones come and do (i.e. criticise – P. R.) it by the measurements of art" soon came true. As soon as in the second next issue of *Estonian Literature* (no. 1, 1911), Fr. Tuglas is observing the new work: "E. Enno's new book wants to be just a personal book: a small 'rose flower in memory' on the grave of the friends of his youth. We believe in the existence of all these friends, they appear before us, as they emerge from life. Their persons do not have much to offer, but neither does Enno require much from them." ... "But by publishing memories, they are handed over to the strange and cold world. It does not have the love and intimate understanding for them that binds ourselves to the meadows of our youth. That strange and cold world believes in the tender beauty of these memories only if they are told tenderly and beautifully."

The same, however, Tuglas cannot say about Enno's book, because he "would like to argue against wholly personal, autobiographical matter and plots which are not at all submitted to the process of artistic re-creation, stylisation, abstraction. We precisely deny the artistic value of the photograph because its matter is accidental, not elaborated in detail, untransformed, too "unfake" for a work of art and – without poetry." The young Tuglas, with very demanding artistic criteria, expresses his views on that work convincingly for a long space, noting that "*Minu sõbrad* contains very little of the great poetry of anticipation and unexpectedness that is the soul of every great work" and "thus Enno's subjects and the method of dealing with these subjects leave the author of these lines very cold."

Minu sõbrad has also left cold all the later students of Enno's work, including authors of anniversary texts, obituaries and major literary histories. *Minu sõbrad* is only mentioned in passing or kept silent about altogether.

Ado Säärts writes in Ernst Enno's obituary: "Today, Enno is a bit outdated. An abyss separates his romantic dream from the realistic practicality of the present. But this abyss does not damage Enno. The better part of his work radiates a metaphysical depth, so far unsurpassed in our poetry, a cosmic longing, pure feeling. It is pure poetry, a music that puts tremors into the soul, and in its ringing a white coast of infinite distances is visualised." (*Estonian Literature* no. 5, 1934.)

The abyss between Enno's work and the contemporary world has been meanwhile deepened and widened by four decades. That has not damaged Enno either. It seems that we are beginning better to understand and re-evaluate literary phenomena from the other side of the abyss.

Let us go to the lands of Enno's youth, let us stand on the boundless greenery of Valguta polder in the middle of high haystacks of several mowings of the summer or in the hot roar of a hay flour factory, and we piously bow to the stubborn optimism of Enno's friend Saare Vana on the once watery meadow of Lake Võrtsjärv. In addition to the self-flowing, artistically disorganised quality, *Minu sõbrad* contains a lot of 'breath-taking music' which has required a distance of time to attain resonance.

"Enno is the sadness of our land of limited circumstances and small opportunities: the one who sang about endless roads and about the wanderer could never travel but in imagination and with the portfolio of a school counsellor.

O dusty aimless roads leading to blue forests! O roadless aims that lead to white coasts of divinity! Home remained Enno's sad antipode of endless paths. This little bank clerk, an eager schoolmaster, a loyal school counselor and a tender and easily crying poet, both in life and in poetry, was forced to stay there."

This quote comes from the preface to Ernst Enno's *Selected Verses* (Estonian Literary Society, Tartu, 1937), written by Bernard Kangro. (Rummo 1973: 70–71)

Enno died in Haapsalu the same year as Mats Ekman, the Estonian Swedish poet whose works will be focused on below. The vicinity of the lives of the two poets can lead readers to draw parallels between them. Both were deeply native to their community. Enno's native language was the Tartu variant of South Estonian, once a language in its own right but considered a dialect since the 19th century. The characters in his stories, published in 1910, speak South Estonian. The early 20th century witnessed a reawakening of southern Estonian dialects in Estonian literature, especially poetry: the poets Artur Adson from the Võru dialect area and Hendrik Adamson from the Mulgi dialect area are among the most famous representatives of that reawakening. Poets like Henrik Visnapuu played with the Estonian language, mixing neologisms with modulated dialect forms. By the 1930s, the fashion of writing poetry in a dialect had reached the island of Hiiumaa, part of the area of northern Estonian dialects, as testified to by the writings of Asta Willmann and Elmar Vrajer. For all such Estonian poets, their native dialect remained just an artistic tool which they handled for the effect of authenticity while mainly thinking, speaking and writing in the standardised common Estonian.

When looking for more archaic dialect poetry in Estonia before the fixation of standardised language norms, the kind of poetry whose author was solely

fluent in the dialect used for its creation, one should turn to more conservative times preceding and coinciding with the establishment of the Republic of Estonia, and widen the focus to embrace writing by poets of ethnic minorities living in Estonia. In the following, I discuss the life and work of the Estonian-Swedish poet Mats Ekman (1865–1934).

An author of minor reputation but unquestionable talent, the Estonian Swedish native skald Mats Ekman could be among the closest in spirit that this country has achieved to the poetic models of Tegnér and Kivi. He wrote in the local dialect of Swedish of Estonia's Western coast, influenced by the Estonian and German languages. So far, Mats Ekman's poems and introductions to them have only been published in Swedish. In 1924, the book *En bygdeskald bland den gamla svenska folkstammen i Estland* (Native Skald among the Old Swedish People in Estonia) was published in Gothenburg, containing 12 poems by Ekman. Ekman's poems were repeatedly published in *Kustbon*, an Estonian-Swedish newspaper that was published in Estonia from 1918, and in Sweden since 1944. The fourth volume of the book series *En bok om Estlands svenskar* (1992), published in Sweden, devotes five pages to Ekman. The Estonian translation of that book by Viktor Aman, *Raamat Eestimaa rootslastest* (A Book on Estonian Swedes), translated by Ivar Rütli, was published in Estonia in 2017. In 2005, Mats Ekman's collection of poems *Prästn e vargskall. Dikter av Mats Ekman* (The Pastor's Wolf Hunt: Poems by Mats Ekman) appeared. In 2011, a reprint of this book was published that includes a CD of songs made from Ekman's poems. In 2018, the book *See maa on Aiboland* (This Land is Aiboland, compiled by Toivo Tomingas) was published in Estonia, including among other material about the coastal Swedes translations of Ekman's three poems into Estonian. In general, slightly fewer than 50 poems from Ekman's work have survived, which are compiled in the book *Prästn e vargskall. Dikter av Mats Ekman*.

One should also mention the fact that Glenn Eric Kranking's dissertation "Island People: Transnational Identification, Minority Politics, and Estonia's Swedish Population", contains Ekman's poem "Eitt tack" in both the Noarootsi Swedish dialect and in English.

Carl Russwurm (1812–1883), a German scholar who came to live in Estonia, has written up his thorough research on the existence of Swedes in the Estonian islands and coastal areas. His voluminous work, *Eibofolke oder die Schweden an den Küsten Ehstlands und auf Runö* (Eibofolke or the Swedes on Estonian Coasts and in Ruhnu), is a 700-page ethnographic study. In 1852, the work won the highest research award from the Russian tsarist state, the Demidov Prize. Of the Estonians, only Fr. R. Kreutzwald has received this award for the creation of the epic *Kalevipoeg*. Russwurm writes:

The number of Swedes living on our coasts, as well as the size of the land inhabited by them, cannot be determined precisely either in the present or in the past, because Swedes and Estonians not only live in close cohabitation in many villages, but many families are already so Estonianised through marriages and communication that it is difficult to prove their origin. At the same time, Estonians who live among Swedish majorities have fully adapted to the Swedish language and customs. (Russwurm 2015: 85)

The Estonian Swedes themselves had a name for their area – Aiboland. Aiboland included Ruhnu, Hiiumaa, Vormsi, Pakri Islands, Naissaar, Osmusaar, Noarootsi (an island which was turning into a peninsula), and the coastal areas of north-western Estonia. According to the idea expressed by Rein Sepp, the translator of medieval Nordic epics, in the old days human migration on the shores of the Baltic Sea was not determined by boundaries set by people, but figuratively by the migrations of schools of herring: “... it was a coastal and rural people who could be more united by the idea of “the herring of spring”” (Rein Sepp’s letter to Lauri Pilter, 31/03/1991). The sea gave the main bread to the coast dwellers, the Estonian Swedes. It is believed that Swedes came to Estonia from both Gotland and Öland, as well as from the Swedish mainland and the Turku archipelago.

The number of Estonian Swedes has always been estimated approximately, but has probably never exceeded ten thousand. About seven thousand people went to Sweden during the Second World War. The number of people left in Estonia is estimated to be over one thousand.

The language of the Estonian Swedes was archaic and divided into several dialects. The Swedes had come to Estonia about 700 years ago and brought with them the dialects of their former residence. The dialects changed over the centuries and also embraced Estonian and German words. The Noarootsi dialect differs from standardised Swedish so much that it is sometimes difficult for a Swede from Sweden to understand it.

Mats Ekman lived all his life in the Riguldi municipality of Noarootsi parish, opposite the Noarootsi peninsula in the coastal area of western Estonia, and was a simple country man who wrote poems. The only language he spoke was the Noarootsi dialect of Swedish. Due to his contact with Estonians, he knew some Estonian, as evidenced by a few Estonian phrases in his poems. The name of his native farm, located between Luksi village and Vanaküla (Gamby), was Ätsve and the local people called the writer of the poems Ätsve Mats. Mats Ekman’s most famous poem “Time of Childhood” follows the rhythm and some of the images of the Swedish poet Anna Maria Lenngren’s (1754–1817) poem “Pojkarne” (The Boys). (Aman 2017: 426) The first lines of their poems are similar. However, it is highly unlikely that Ekman had ever heard of

Lenngren and her poem, or that he ever absorbed influences from any other poet, except from the words of the songs of the recruits whom he heard singing during their departure from the native village. (Aman 2017: 426)

Among the local people, Ätsve Mats was valued and loved and his poems quickly became songs that were known and written down. Therefore, several versions of some poems have survived. But as Aman says, “From the beginning, Mats made poems to entertain people. On the spot, he was considered just a joke. The respect came from the educated people.” (Aman 2017: 428) When Ekman died at the age of nearly 70, local folk high school teachers wrote him obituaries that appeared in *Kustbon*. (Ekman 2005: 12) When Mats Ekman was born and when he went to school, there was a wave of Russification in the tsarist state. Mats Ekman studied at the Swedish-language school in Höbring, Riguldi. The Russification policy also affected Swedish-language schools, but teachers still managed to evade the obligation to teach all subjects except mother tongue and religion in Russian. (Aman 2017: 173–174) Mats Ekman’s education was limited to three school winters. By the age of three, Mats had already suffered from a serious illness, as a result of which his right hand was paralysed. He was unable to do farm work that required physical strength, and therefore became a meadow and pasture guard and animal handler. (Aman 2017: 425) For some time he was a postman, which meant, among other things, boating between Noarootsi and Haapsalu. In the book *Prästn e vargskall*, the author Ingegerd Lindström has published Ingeborg Opstad’s memoirs about Ätsve Mats.

In the twenties, it was the custom of me and other young herders to go to Mats’s cottage in the evenings after driving the cattle home. When he was present, we sat on the fence and sang to him. It was interesting to read the poems he had written on the door, both outside and inside. There were also poems on empty packs of cigarettes. They should have been written down, but an eight-year-old could not think that way. (Ekman 2005: 11)

Mats’ poems would probably have survived only as anonymous folk songs if it had not been for Jakob Blees. Jakob Blees (1866–1947) was also an Estonian Swede born in Riguldi, a peer of Mats Ekman and a schoolmate. The fates of the two were completely different. The eager and enterprising Jakob Blees managed to leave the Russian tsarist state for Sweden as early as 1889. For that purpose, he had to apply for permission from the Governor of Estonia, the Prince and the Tsar’s secret adviser, Sergei Shakhovskoy. (Lagman 1946: 1–2) The persistent and inquisitive young man succeeded in studying theology in Sweden and became a pastor and historian. He wrote several books on the life of Swedes outside Sweden, including in Estonia. Jakob Blees remained interested in observing life in his former home region, and in 1924 he published

twelve poems by Mats Ekman in Sweden. Blee's article, which included Mats Ekman's poems in the dialect with translations into Swedish, was published under the title *En bygdeskald bland den gamla svenska folkstammen i Estland* by The Royal Society of Arts and Sciences in Gothenburg. (Kustbon 1973: 2)

Mats wrote the majority of his poems while working in Riguldi manor and entertained people by reading or singing the poems to them. The poems were initially written down by the listeners. It was only when Mats found an empty notebook in the attic of the manor house that he started writing down his verses. (Nyman 1990: 3) Jakob Blee had encouraged Mats Ekman to write both poems and a biography, but Mats's first notebook with poems was lost. Mats had the notebook with notes in his pocket when he sailed to Haapsalu in an open mail boat. The boat started to fill with water in a storm, and it rained a lot. The notebook got wet in the water and turned into a clot of paper, which the man threw overboard.

A notebook has been found in which the poems were probably written by Mats himself. There may be more notebooks with Mats's poems, but the back cover of that notebook reads:

When summer comes, I will do what I promised. Everything is gone, it's easier to write new ones than old ones, I even don't remember the old ones. I promised to write a biography, but I don't know how to deal with it, everything has been forgotten. I've intended to post my little work for some time, but I haven't done it. People are hungry for it, so it can be lost. Every day they insist: show it to me, give it to me. (Ekman 2005: 9)

The surviving poems testify to both Mats's sensitive mind and his ability to put descriptions of everyday life into rhymes. One of his best-known poems has also been translated into Estonian.

Lapsepõlveaeg (Noorusmälestus)

Nüüd meenutan ma aega,
mil kõik näis hiigelsuur.
Ma kandma nõus kõik vaevad,
et korduks nooruskuu!

Oi kevadööde hurma,
kui päikesära eel
seal tedrepere pulma
näis kuts'vat käo keel.

Båndomstien eller Ungdomsminne

Ja minns han fagor tien
tå all var vålde stort.
Å kund ja än få si en
hä' skulld ja rät ha gjord?

Tå fagor mårja våre
mä sina fagor sol.
Så mike kutra årre,
så fagott gucken gol.

Oh kauneid kevadpäevi
ja lühinappe öid!
Nii armsaid kostis hääli!
Nii palju kiireid töid!

Om måren daningstien
hå' ljuherd ja tå.
Tå boskan gick ör bien
å Far min gick ut så.

Ja lepaladvust hõikus
siis valjult hoburäst'
ja läbi küla löikus
ta viis: krät-krät, krät-krät.

Huft opp fram ale skåtan
ja herd grantålkens prat.
Å många gång fråm Nåtan
ja herd „krät-krät, krat-krat“.

Nii helendavat haljust
siis tulvil oli laas.
Nii kaunilt rukis heljus,
mäed-orud – öitsev aas.

Hå fagror var änt skoen
e sina ljusgren färg.
Så fagort svalla roen,
allt blomskast dal å bärg.

Mu õhtuid täitis ööbik.
Neid imeviise seal!

Å gick a ut längs Stråte,
oxkern han sjongd så gällt.

(Tomingas 2018: 60–61, translated
by Toivo Tomingas, edited by L. Pilter)

(Ekman 2005: 15–17)

On the five pages that Viktor Aman has devoted to Mats Ekman's work in his book *A Book on Estonian Swedes: A Cultural Historical Review*, he argues:

Is there a better definition of childhood than the second line of Mats Ekman's poem "Båndomstien" (Time of Childhood)? The following lines of the same stanza contain the adult's fascination with the thought of experiencing childhood again. What if... *Välde* (enormously) is a child's expression for what transcends his or her own size. In the following stanzas, he looks through the child's eyes at the farm where he grew up, at the village and the field, the forest, the coast. Words and word sequences are inherently simple and direct, without literary embellishments; he just says it as it was. That is why it is exciting. (Aman 2017: 425)

Mats Ekman's poem "Båndomshajma" (Childhood Home) is a rhymed autobiography. The poem begins with a description of the childhood home, the following verses are about being a herdsman and going to school. The reader learns that he went to school at the age of 11. After graduating from school and having received church confirmation he became the herdsman of his community.

Georg Stahl's article (Stahl 1969: 6) shows that a few years before his death, Mats Ekman had called the period of guarding the herd a "voluntary prison" in his life. He had to live in a straw and reed hut on the edge of the pasture in

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all weathers, and the only reward was food brought by the animal owners. The following lines show that his loneliness was soothed by a friend's visits.

Tär var ja äinge-vaftar,
tär levd ja e ajn hitt.
Te me kam hâtes aftar
min vän, som tär var skitt.

(I was a herdsman, I lived in a hut. In the evenings, a friend who was a hunter came to me.)

Georg Stahl explains that his friend was the skipper of a Coast Guard sailboat, who often went hunting and was a passionate card player. (Ekman 2005: 24) The coast guards were border guards during the tsarist era, whose main job was to prevent smuggling and control those who went to and came from the sea.

One summer, as Mats Ekman was guarding the manor horses in the pasture at night, he was offered more work at the manor leading to him serving in Riguldi manor for 15 years.

Ja valla femta somar,
å nö var häilsa å,
å taskarna vor tomar.
Nå hållt ja nia rå.

(I went herding for 15 summers, my health was gone, my pockets were empty, I had to look for a new job.)

The man guarding the horses now became a rag merchant moving from village to village, then a boatman to a travelling merchant.

Ve kerd nö gärm mång ajar
man vunno lite päng.

(We visited many islands, but got little money.)

World War I broke out and Mats felt "nästan baror, å lite var mitt bre" (almost naked and without bread).

And again Mats guarded the village herd for years, then started to carry the mail.

At the end of his life, he was a local postman and undertaker at his former school.

Nö går ja å bår mä postn,
 ja tarvas änt majr vall,
 e skolhuse mä kostn
 he sa ä nö mitt kall.

(Now I carry letters and no longer look after the herd. My job now is to wipe at the schoolhouse.)

Livsklocka hlår snart sjutte,
 allt känns så trett å villt,
 å bajna ä halvrote,
 tåm gära båra illt.

(The clock of life will soon be seventy, everything seems so cold and ugly, the legs are half-rotten, they only hurt.) (Ekman 2005: 18–25)

“Prästn e vargskall” (The Pastor’s Wolf Hunt) is a long poem that could be based on the real story of a failed hunting trip made by two pastors, which had become a local legend. The pastors of Noarootsi and Vormsi drove a wagon with a farmer’s horse to go hunting in the forest. The horse broke free in fear of wolves and the men got into trouble. This story had happened around the time Mats Ekman was born. (Stahl 1969: 10)

The author refrains from naming the characters in this poem, while in many other poems he calls the people from his community either by their real names or by nicknames. The poem is about a pastor who goes hunting alone, shoots a wolf and dreams of what he will make with its skin. But the wolf’s five cubs appear, growl menacingly and besiege the hunter. He climbs a birch tree and recites the Bible to the wolves. He squats in the tree for two days until a local tailor rescues him from the wolves. The pastor is embarrassed, thinking that people no longer respect him as a preacher.

Än präst gick ut ått skoen,
 han gick ått skoen skjut,
 han gick ått Gambes moen;
 tår herd’n varga tjut.

(One of the pastors went to the forest, went hunting in the forest, went beyond Gamby, there he heard the howl of a wolf.)

The pastor shoots the wolf.

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Nö sa'en han är deor
 å nö e skine mitt.
 Han grinar å han leor;
 sa: "Ja e goan skitt."

(The man said, "He's dead and the skin is mine." He laughed and said, "I'm a good hunter.")

"Här får and fagra läinge
 å stora vargskinn-task.
 Får täicke ive senge,
 ått frua får ja kask."

("I'll get a beautiful collar and a big wolfskin bag, a blanket on the bed and a coat for my wife.")

But the wolf cubs will take revenge.
 Nö kam der fem små gråor,
 å prästn skräft se å;
 h hlo se reor å blåor,
 å bajna bor änt stå.

(Now five little grey cubs came, the pastor began to fear, his face turned red and blue, his legs would not support him.)

He climbs a birch tree and reads prayers there. On the third day, however, the wolves begin to retreat after the epistle of Judas, and when a tailor from a neighbouring village arrives, the pastor is forced to explain what happened. He regrets that he went hunting. During the hunt, he has lost his preacher's robe and the large knife and the rifle he had borrowed. And also respect.

„Tå fåigga nö e bia
 få her huss ja ha kerd,
 tā räknas ja te kria
 å änt te sjåla herd.“

("When the villagers hear what has happened to me, they will no longer consider me a shepherd, but a fool.") (Ekman 2005: 75–81)

In his poems, Mats Ekman dealt with customs, traditions and beliefs. He wrote about the villagers, sometimes lyrically, sometimes sarcastically, depicting the time of the ancestors, farm and manor life, as well as changes and new phenomena in his contemporary society. He describes the customs of the holidays: "Galfälkes bruker å troar" (Customs and Beliefs of the Ancient People),

“Påske minnen” (Remembrance of Easter), “Fårretien å nöfartien” (Old Time and Present Time). Ekman always chooses the themes of his poems from his home area. He describes the villages and their inhabitants: “Söderbiggia” (Söderby Village People), “Höbring”, “Ormse pia” (Vormsi Girl).

The poem “Luselagge” (written in 1893, “Luksi küla” in Estonian. The Ekman homestead was located between Ätsve Luksi and Vanaküla) creates a spirited picture of a summer morning.

Ätsvebon gjord äingevall;
gambiggja gjord tär om skall.
Nistobon gick ut åt sjoen,
tjaror gick räint ätt skoen.

(The man of Ätsve went to the meadow, the people of Vanaküla did the same. The Nisto family went to the sea, the others to the forest.)

Krearn gick ätt skoen ätt aiken,
Fölviksmor fick host e rajken.
Smeen sto å skua hästn,
Alskobon frästa västn.

(The Kroeni man went to bring a horse from the forest, the Fölvik mother coughed in the smoke. The blacksmith shod the horse, the Alsko master tried on his vest.)

Karjas katta satt e horva,
Råttana gnavla backas kårva.
Hasn sparka Matsas broddn.
Räven satt å skällt e udn.

(The Karjas cat was sitting at the end of the garden, the rats were chewing sausages in the pantry, the rabbit ran in the Matsas crop, the fox was barking in the corner of the field.)

Matsas katta gnavla käte,
bon staiv opp å gav mä späte.
Hose satt all aikja färe
allor gingo dä ut äre.

(Matsas's cat was at meat, the owner got up and whipped the cat with a stick, the manor people went to the field with horses.) (Ekman 2005: 137)

The author describes simultaneous activities with very well chosen phrases. In terms of the immediate memorability of sound and imagination, this summer description is reminiscent of Juhan Liiv's poems about winter moods.

In his long poem "Tå eisten kam upp från lande" (When an Estonian Came from the Hinterland), Ekman gives an extensive list of villages and farms in the area, describing the Estonian's attempts to find a kind farm family to help him go fishing. Such a lyrical topography in the form of an exciting verse narrative had a strong influence on the self-consciousness of the Swedes. Estonian-Swedish intellectuals Elmar Gustaf Nyman (1919–2008) and Edvin Lagman (1919–2001), two generations younger than Mats Ekman, who both reached high academic positions in Sweden, were very probably inspired by the unpretentious but talented work of the simple native skald for their research. Both Nyman and Lagman have written about Mats Ekman. Edvin Lagman, a linguist born in Riguldi and a researcher of Estonian-Swedish dialects, whose maternal grandfather was Jakob Blee's brother, transformed the same topics that Ekman had previously mapped in popular work into scientific research such as "Eesti-Rootsi asulatevõrgu tekkimise kohanimede taustal"² (1974).

Although only the legend of the Estonian-Swedish settlement in Estonian islands and coastal areas has survived, Mats Ekman's work has acquired lasting value due to qualities that have characterised important literature everywhere: thanks to his admiring, attentive look at the world, like that of a child in his or her early teens freshly learning to know good and evil, an ethical humour, love for one's small community and thus life in general. Such qualities can also be found in the works of younger generations of Estonian-Swedish authors who were intellectuals. Of particular note is Elmar Nyman's short story "Ain Håsolrais" (How I Went to Haapsalu, Tomingas 2018: 49–54) written in the Noarootsi Swedish dialect. In the course of a colourful incident (taking a bull-heifer from Noarootsi by boat across the bay to the Haapsalu slaughterhouse), the story takes on a humorous form, the seriousness of which is reminiscent of developments of similar themes in world literature by authors such as Charles Dickens, Mark Twain and William Faulkner.

Viktor Aman writes: "When evaluating Mats Ekman's poetry, there is no need to use a learned analytical apparatus together with the study of literary influences, stylistic techniques, the counting of metres, etc." (Aman: 2017: 426)

So what makes Mats Ekman's poems valuable and noteworthy at all?

² The Emergence of the Estonian-Swedish Settlement Network on the Background of Place Names.

It is his sincerity – with no literary influences – in expressing his feelings, his ability to choose words which are meaningful to the listener or reader and which paint pictures before the eyes. The opening verse of the poem “Eitt tack” (Thanks) reminds us that there was an even smaller country within the already small Estonia: Aiboland.

Vårt Aiboländ ver Eistländs stränd
 mä mike fagran hoitan sånd.
 Fäm aiar lige utafär,
 som mä te Aibolände her.

(Our Aiboland is located on the Estonian coast with a lot of beautiful sand. Farther away are five islands that also belong to Aiboland.)

Thanks to Mats Ekman, the Noarootsi Swedish dialect has been recorded. If his poems had not survived, people today would not have an accurate idea of life in Aiboland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As an Estonian Swede, Ekman is free of the dichotomy of savage peasant and civilised aristocrat that always impeded the freedom of imagination of Estonians living under German colonisation. As a simple Swedish peasant, he is also free of the curse of over-refinement of the ruling classes. Finally, as a handicapped person, he is by a blow of fate free of the obligations of matrimony and hard work. What he has achieved in his 45 extant poems is artistically modest in comparison with the vast and towering epic canvases of Tegnér and Aleksis Kivi. Nevertheless, his poetry, mainly humorous pictures of the village life, finds a balance between the epic of a verse narrative and the lyric of word play. It also carefully balances the life of people and natural surroundings – the inner and the outer worlds of human nature.

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